ABSTRACT

A CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION: OLDER WOMEN EMBRACING THE DIVINE FEMININE

By Lydia K. Manning

In this research I explore how a specific spiritual orientation of select women shapes the social meaning and process of their aging. The central question of this research revolves around how older women who identify as Pagan experience growing older, and how that spiritual identity and practice characterizes their understanding of aging. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and explore the meaning of life and aging for women identifying as Pagan. Three major themes within the data demonstrate the interconnectedness between acceptance of self through aging, empowerment through spirituality, and nature as a source of the sacred. These women were able to embed their experiences of aging within a unique and specific cultural framework: a spiritual and foundational framework cultivating their authenticity, spiritual strength, and deep connection with nature. This research provides a unique and important point on the continuum of study within spirituality, religion, feminism, and aging. Their lived experiences provide gerontology and women’s studies with a refreshing example of the no longer invisible older woman. The women in this study provide a valuable model for how to organically live the feminist experience, and how to consciously evolve through spiritual empowerment, a living and changing that welcomes, celebrates, and embraces aging.
A CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION: OLDER WOMEN EMBRACING THE DIVINE FEMININE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Miami University in

partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Master of Gerontological Studies

Department of Sociology and Gerontology

by

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2004

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all the wise women who have come before me, all who are here with me, and all who will follow. I am eternally grateful and continually blessed to be part of this beautiful sistership. Let us all continue to consciously evolve.

Acknowledgment

This labor of love would not have been possible without the unending support and dedication of my advisors, professors and committee members; for your brilliance and enthusiasm I am truly grateful. A special thanks to Dr. Lisa Groger for knowing me so well. Your insight and beauty have made this an incredible and affirming learning experience. Thanks to Kathy McGrew for believing in and encouraging me to stay true to my intentions. Thanks to Chris Wellin for giving me time and space to reflect. Thanks to Scott for your love, support and encouraging late night conversations about the Goddess, the Earth Mother, old women and what it all means anyway. Thanks to all those who have helped and affirmed me along the way and thanks to the amazing women who agreed to be a part of this study (you taught me more about living than you could possibly know). Blessings to you all.
Chapter I

Introduction

This research explores how a specific spiritual orientation of select women shapes the meaning and process of their aging. My central question in this research is how older women, ranging from 43 to 68 years of age, who identify as Pagan, experience aging in relation to their spiritual identity and practice. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data reflecting issues of acceptance, spiritual empowerment and connection to nature in regard to informants’ formation and evolution of identity and practice as Pagans. Paganism is an eclectic and expansive religious movement that accompanies many forms of ritual practices (shamanism, polytheism, and magical religions). Religions deemed Pagan can be characterized by their focus on nature-centered spirituality; the honoring of pre-Christian deities; dynamic personal belief system; lack of institutionalization; a quest to develop the self; and acceptance or encouragement of diversity (Pagan Education Network, 2001). Major findings from this research reflect an innovative perspective within feminist gerontology. This research is an answer to Ruth Ray’s “call for critical, self-reflective methodologies that integrate cognitive, emotional, ethical, and spiritual aspects of knowledge-making” (Ray, 2004, p. 109). It brings together the discourses of gerontology and feminism, offering a unique perspective on aging women living their feminist spirituality.

The objectives of this thesis are to present findings from a qualitative research project with older women who identify as Pagan, exploring how their spiritual identities and practices shape their experience of aging. Therefore, the primary method of data collection was in the form of semi-structured interviews intending to capture the essence of these women’s spiritual experiences. The interviews were then transcribed, analyzed and coded into major theoretical and conceptual categories using grounded theory. In addition to exploring the emergent conceptual themes presented in the women’s discourse, I also employ feminist theoretical frameworks for examining the participants’ acceptance of self, spiritual empowerment, and the “sacred mundane,” or the ability to recognize the divine otherworldliness in everyday life and living. I also discuss the
importance of bringing the discourses of gerontology and women’s studies together in a way that is unique within the field - adding the older woman as crone to feminist gerontology. I explore what contributions this research makes to the field of gerontological research and suggest how to best integrate and incorporate this model of the no longer invisible and aging woman into our world views. Finally, I offer my participants an opportunity to tell their stories, in hopes of giving them a voice that can be heard not just at the margins, but within all of society.
Chapter II
Literature Review

The Religion of Paganism

Paganism is a religion; it is not atheism, agnosticism, or indifference to religion (Farrar, Bone, 1995). Paganism as a religion is gaining popularity throughout the U.S.; people are attracted to the principles of free thinking, lack of dogma, and rejection of proselytizing. Essentially, Paganism as a religion and religious movement is Nature-venerating, polytheistic, and recognizant of the Goddess (Harvey and Hardman, 1996). Harvey and Hardman (1996, p. 34) describe Paganism and one who identifies as Pagan as follows: “A Pagan religion has three characteristics. It is polytheistic, recognizing a plurality of divine beings, which may or may not be One, Two, or Three, etc. It sees the material world and its laws as a theophany, a manifestation of divinity. Finally, Pagan religions recognize the female face of divinity, referred to by modern Pagans as the Goddess: taken for granted in Her many manifestations by the Pagans of the ancient world.”

There is no place for dogma or proselytizing in Paganism. Harvey and Hardman outline the three basic principles of Paganism as contained in the Pagan Federation Statement (1996, p. xi):


The Pagan Ethic: ‘Do what thou wilt, but harm none.’ This is a positive morality, not a list of thou-shalt-nots. Each individual is responsible for discovering her own true nature and developing it fully, in harmony with the outer world.

The Concept of the Goddess and God: expressions of the Divine reality; an active participation in the cosmic dance of Goddess and God, female and male, rather than the suppression of either female or the male principle.”
Paganism is an eclectic and expansive religious movement accompanying many forms of ritual practices (shamanism, polytheism, and magical religions). Pagan religions are characterized by their focus on nature-venerating spirituality; the honoring of pre-Christian deities; dynamic individual belief system; lack of institutionalization; concentration on the development and transformation of self; and acceptance or encouragement of diversity and equality (Pagan Education Network, 2001). Paganism is often referred to as Neo-Paganism to emphasize the connections to and differences between pre-Christian religions and the myriad of religious and spiritual practices within the larger context of Paganism. The majorities of those practicing Paganism are white, middle class, but also include many individuals comprising other racial, gender, and social economic status groups. The estimated number of Pagans in the U.S. is 100,000, and as a religion it is considered to be the fastest growing in the West (Pagan Education Network, 2001).

Paganism as a religious, spiritual and social movement has roots in the environmental awareness and women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s. With a focus on earth-centered spirituality and equality, Paganism questions the way Western cultures and religions dominate the Earth and subjugate women. Paganism rejects the tendency for dominance over the Earth, as well as questions underlying intention to oppress others. Pagans consciously strive to live as a part of the Earth, finding a balance between self, nature and society. The notion that Earth is sacred and all people are equal leads to recognition of the “Divine Feminine,” or the balancing feminine energy and feminine aspect of God. The multitude of Goddesses within Paganism offers various practitioners the chance to connect and celebrate the powerful Divine Feminine absent in many other Western religions (Pagan Education Network, 2001).

In summary, then, the fundamental components, major assumptions, and commonly agreed-upon principles of Paganism are:
- No dogma or doctrine
- Shared understanding and reverence of Earth as life sustaining mother
- Individual, personal experience; practitioners encouraged to give and take away from the practice what is appropriate for her/him
- Sharing of ritual experience optional, not expected of seekers
- Rather than establish a structured community, concentrate on the process of creating a “fluid” community of spiritual seekers
- “If harm none, do what will”
- No effort to convert others
- No gurus (individuals create own spiritual path and are free to adapt personal belief system)
- Flexible and adaptable to forces of natures and environmental contexts
- Acceptance of Divinity within

*Spiritually, Religion and Aging*

Spirituality is a commonly used term that permeates popular culture. It is a term used by many to describe religious world-view and understanding of life experience, while for others it reflects an indescribable state of being having nothing to do with religiosity. Moberg (2001, p. 3) explains, “Many people have a personal implicit religion of experiences, feelings, ultimate commitments, foci of interaction, and intensive concerns for which they live, even if they reject conventional religious faith… their visible religion is not the same as their invisible spirituality, although religion and spirituality are often treated as if they are identical.” No matter how one defines spirituality, it is infused with aspects of traditional religion. Many will claim to be spiritual while denouncing formal religion (Moberg, 2001). In an attempt to explore and discuss matters pertaining to spirituality and religion, it is important to create a context of unambiguous explanation.

Most scholars agree that *religion* is reflective of social groups or institutions that embody theological dogma, doctrine, hierarchy and organized group structure pertaining to ritual and worship and practice (Atchley, 1997). While religion implies a tendency
toward the institution, spirituality implies a movement towards self-determination. The concept of *spirituality* as described by Atchley (1997, p. 124) “is an inner, experiential domain that can include experiences of religion and religious social contexts but is not restricted to such experiences. Spiritual experience can occur at many levels: physical, cognitive, emotional, and transpersonal; it can be both transcendent and immanent, transcending worldly concerns, as well as intense present moment perceptions that ground all beings.” Leder (1996, p. 107) adds to this explanation by stating that “spirituality need not involve adherence to a set of religious tenets, or even beliefs in a personal God; it refers to dimensions of meaning which, for the individual, opens onto what she or he experiences as the most grounding and significant modes of connection.” The notion of individual, personal experience is essential to the conceptual understanding of spirituality.

The surge of interest regarding spirituality in mainstream culture is also reflected within the field of gerontology. The implications of spirituality and religiosity on late-life and older adulthood have become quite popular over the last decade of gerontological research. Major professional organizations, such as the Gerontological Society of America and the American Society on Aging, have subcommittees, forums and special sessions each year to explore and discuss the latest trends and developments regarding spirituality, religion and aging. The work being done within the field of gerontology, regardless of how innovative and pioneering it may be, continues to offer only certain aspects on the continuum of mainstream spirituality and religion.

The literature associated with spirituality, religion and aging reflects the major and traditional patriarchal models of spirituality and religion. When this literature explores spirituality and religion in contexts outside of Christianity, it remains within the context of the major world traditions, all of which neglect to acknowledge the face of the Divine Feminine. Exploration of the “crone archetype,” the wise woman aspect of the Goddess (which will be discussed in detail later in the findings) resides mainly in the discourses of psychology and feminist spirituality. Conceivably, the failure of gerontology to focus on spiritualities that embrace the Divine Feminine and religions such as Paganism stems from an overarching need for gerontology to continually establish itself as a proper and faithful academic and scientific discipline. Or perhaps it is
because the participants of what most would deem a sub-cultural and marginal spiritual practice and religion simply have little or no opportunity to tell their story.

Atchley (2000, p. 327) posits that although spirituality has become quite popular in mainstream culture and academia, its “soft” nature from a scientific viewpoint has caused “spirituality to be stereotyped by scientific gerontology as a suspect enterprise, because it deals with aspects of human life that cannot easily be measured by conventional scientific methods.” Despite the fact that such experiences cannot be scientifically measured, vast numbers of people willingly talk about their spiritual connections and experiences (Atchley, 2000). Spirituality is of paramount importance to experiencing and understanding essential aspects of human nature. There is evidence that as individuals age their levels of spiritual growth gradually increase, especially with the increase in self-acceptance and perceptions of one’s life having integrity (Atchley, 2000; Gadow, 1983, Scott-Maxwell, 1979, Tobin, 1991). Some argue that the natural process of aging creates a context where older adults can become more self-reflexive and self-accepting, opening the mind/body/spirit to an expansion and deeper sense of knowing. Atchley (2000) suggests that we afford elders the opportunity to share these experiences, giving us insight into their spiritual journeys. It is important that we offer all elders a chance to tell their spiritual story, regardless of where that identity and practice falls on the continuum of religion and spirituality.

*Gerontology and the Feminist Perspective*

It is a well established fact that the American population of individuals over 65 has been increasing, and an even more dramatic increase is expected in the age group 85 and older. Because women live longer than men do, women will naturally dominate the population segments of elders. The aging movement in the U.S. has been characterized as a woman’s issue. This is demonstrated, for example, in the structural make-up of a nursing home – an industry owned mainly by men, ran by women, worked in by women, and lived in by women. With the growing numbers of aging women, there coincides a natural tendency for the harmonization between feminism and gerontology. Over the last fifteen years, the work in feminist gerontology has dramatically increased, a trend that
Browne (1998) points out to be encouraging. But even in the face of this increase in interest, there still remains a significant amount of work to be done.

Research regarding older women pertains mostly to issues associated with traditional family values and women’s roles. Such research has the potential for undermining feminist perspectives by reaffirming and reifying women’s traditional roles (Browne, 1998). In feminism’s effort to improve the lives of women, it is clear that the lives and realities of older women have gone unnoticed, reinforcing the concept of the “invisible older women.” Feminism and gerontology have the potential to improve the lives of older women by empowering them to embrace and celebrate their experiences of aging, making them a visible faction of our society and culture. This work, along with that of other feminist gerontologists, recognizes that older women in the aggregate have the potential for being a population at risk and therefore targets of concern, but more importantly can be characterized for their embodiment of strength, beauty and spirit.

Feminism is more than recognition that women and men do not share equal stations in society. Browne (1998, p. xx) states feminism is “about understanding women’s lives in terms of advantages and disadvantages from their gender, race, class, age, and other sites of oppression, and about the gendered position of power and domination in a collective as opposed to an individual sense. It is an oppositionalist movement against modernity and the patriarchy.” Catherine MacKinnon, cited by Browne (1998, p.xx) explains, “Feminism sees women as groups and seeks to define and pursue women’s interest. Feminists believe that women share a reality, and search for it, even as they criticize the leveling effects of the social enforcement of its commonalities. Feminism’s search for a common ground is a search for the truth of all women’s collectivity in the face of the enforced lie that all women are the same.” Regardless of how one defines feminism, there remains the overarching theme of seeking to improve the lives of women.

There are various feminist theoretical frameworks and approaches dealing with women, power, inequality, class, culture, race and gender (not all of which I will attempt to address). Commonalties of the theories and approaches are seen in the goals and strategies used in improving the lives of women. For purpose of discussion, I will concentrate on two areas relevant to the feminist perspective to better understand the
experiences of Pagan women: empowerment and ecofeminism. It is necessary to define “empowerment” and “ecofeminism” in terms of how they are operationalized in my research. In this context, “empowerment” deviates from the traditional use pertaining to conflict models in regards to personal control and political gain. Rather the way in which I define “empowerment” reflects spiritual strength, acceptance of an aging self and embracing being an old woman. Ecofeminism reflects the understanding that women’s bodies, along with the earth and nature have the potential for being dominated and subjugated (Adams, 1993). Ecofeminism recognizes the natural synchronization of women and nature and as a feminist perspective is useful in understanding how the women in this study perceive their aging bodies in relation to the earth.

Gerontology and feminism have overlap and commonalty when considering older women: they both seek to maximize “authenticity, recognize the need of political and social activism to make a difference, and identify the potentials of age” (Brown, 1998, p. 263). This research brings gerontology and feminism together in a way that seeks to encourage a perspective and model of aging that exemplifies the authenticity, potentiality and opulence of aging. It also calls for contemplation on improving the lives of older women, and improving the way gerontologists and feminists think about and perceive them. This research provides an insightful look into the lives of eight women who are authentically divine, spiritually empowered, and sacredly mundane; all alive, excited, liberated and trusting in themselves as aging women.
Chapter III

Methodology

Participants

For qualitative researchers, the choosing of participants for study is of utter importance, and lies at the heart of the intention to capture the rich complexity of experience and culture. Qualitative research seeks not to maximize generalizability, but rather to gain access to how a specific group of people or culture construes their world; qualitative research “does not survey the terrain, it mines it” (McCracken, 1990, p. 17). Another important component of qualitative research is the guiding principle of “less is more,” with the intention to offer a glimpse of the “complicated character, organization, and logic of culture.” Choosing a small number of respondents is perfectly sufficient and acceptable (McCracken, 1990, p. 17). Qualitative researchers disagree about the optimal number of respondents needed to capture the complexity and richness of a specific culture or collective experience. McCracken (1990) informs us that eight participants are an optimal number, allowing the researcher to both capture enough variation and stay in touch with the data.

In an attempt to capture the rich experiences of women who many deem marginal and deviant, I used extreme “sampling” to select cases that are unusual and thus reside outside of mainstream society in terms of participants’ spiritual identities and practices (Patton, 1980). My intentions were to explore the experiences of women at various stages in their spiritual journeys and at various degrees of commitment to Paganism. I selected eight women as participants for this exploratory study.

To select participants for this study, I chose the technique described by Patton (1980) as purposive but extreme sampling, and described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as purposive, interactional, and theoretical sampling. Qualitative researchers often use terms referring to sample selection, size and purpose interchangeably. Regardless of the synonymic nature, I used methods of sampling, which sought to select women whose diverse experiences would capture the wide range of Pagan identities.
I created a flyer explaining the nature, intent, and details of the study, along with contact information (see Appendix A). I distributed flyers in over a dozen occult shops (shops or bookstores dealing with supernatural influences, agencies, or phenomena, and places that sell merchandise related to Paganism and earth-based spirituality) in the greater Cincinnati area, and also in Yellow Springs, OH, a town known for its abundance of a population identifying as Pagan. I also disseminated recruitment flyers to various Pagan Listservs and internet discussion boards for practitioners in greater the Cincinnati area. Women began contacting me within hours of the initial dissemination of flyers. As the recruitment flyer was spread to various Pagan Listservs around the country and various parts of the world, women began contacting me from all over, including England and British Columbia, most excited about the nature of the study and grateful for the opportunity to tell their story. I began recruiting women for convenience in the southern Ohio area. I was interested in talking to women who self-identified as Pagan, meaning that they incorporated the major elements of Pagan religion into their lives.

I recruited eight women ranging in age from forty-three to sixty-eight years. All eight women identify as Pagan, that is, they hold to a belief system characterized by their focus on nature-centered spirituality, most honoring the pre-Christian deities, dynamic personal belief system, lack of institutionalization, a quest to develop the self, and acceptance or encouragement of diversity (Pagan Education Network, 1996). All eight participants are white, middle-class women, reflecting the fact that the majority of the ten thousand Pagans in the United States are middle-class, white women (Pagan Education Network, 1996). Seven women hold undergraduate degrees from accredited universities and one holds multiple graduate degrees. One is an ordained Wiccan Minister, and two are self-appointed high priestesses.

Five of the women have been practicing Paganism for over twenty years, two have been practicing over ten years, and one has recently begun her spiritual journey into the world of Paganism. Five women are comfortable revealing their spiritual identity to their family; three fear lack of acceptance and familial tensions and therefore have not revealed themselves. The women vary in when and to whom to disclose their spiritual identity; whether to “be out of the broom closet” (a phrase common in the Pagan community to describe a public identity as Pagan) at work and in other sectors of their
lives. Seven women are or have been married, five remain married to their initial spouses, and one has never married. Seven women are mothers and wives, and three still have children living at home. All of the participants have at one time been part of the labor force; one is currently unemployed, one is retired, and the other five are still working.

Seven of the participants identify as a *Crone*, or as an elder, wise-woman reflecting the late-life aspect of the Goddess, and feel comfortable placing their aging experience into the context of the crone archetype. All of the participants have taken part in a croning ritual, either for themselves or others. Five have had an actual croning ritual to mark their passage into wise-woman elderhood. All eight incorporate the Goddess into some aspect of their belief system. It is important to note that the women in this study have specific cohort distinctions that set them apart from other older women. The participants have made it clear that the culture and historical events of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in relation to the women’s movement, have had significant impact on their spiritual journeys and other aspects of their adult development. To protect participants’ confidentiality, I omitted names throughout this report and refrained from using any information disclosing their true identities.
**Figure 1: Biographical Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Marital Status/Children</th>
<th>Defining Life Events</th>
<th>Croning Ritual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Multiple Graduate degrees</td>
<td>Divorced; 4 children</td>
<td>Finding the ability to “let-go”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Married; 1 child</td>
<td>Feminism, Paganism and motherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Married; 2 children</td>
<td>Facing and fighting a terminal illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Married; 2 children</td>
<td>Becoming a mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Married; 1 child</td>
<td>Feminism and then Paganism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Married; 2 children</td>
<td>Finding her inner power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Divorced; no children</td>
<td>Becoming a Crone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Never married; no children</td>
<td>Feminist movement and experiences of the 1960s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection and Analysis

My intentions in this study were to explore how Paganism as a spiritual identity shaped the experience of aging and of being an older woman. I was interested in understanding what being Pagan means for my informants, what effects it has on their life experiences and how it impacts the social construction of their aging. My biggest challenge was to pose questions to the women that would capture the richness and uniqueness of their spiritual identities and implications for the aging process without reflecting my own biases, hopes, and expectations. I was concerned that past experience with outside inquiry would cause the women to be hesitant in sharing the depth of their experience of being Pagan, possibly for fear that I would not understand. I chose not to disclose my own spiritual orientation, but to be honest about my sincere and intensely keen interest and respect for Paganism as a spiritual identity and practice.

I chose the long interview as my tool of inquiry for the “highly efficient, productive, and stream-lined nature, and for its ability to help in the capturing of complex spiritual experiences of the women” (McCracken, 1990, p. 7). I strategically planned and employed the open-ended questions to capture the richness and detail of experience in an attempt to maximize the value and amount of time spent with each woman (McCracken, 1990). In the words of McCracken (1990, p. 9) “the long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory… no other method is more revealing. The method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which she sees the world. It gives us the opportunities to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves.”

After the participants identified themselves to me and agreed to participate in the study, I contacted each woman by phone and asked her to briefly describe to me her spiritual orientation to ensure that she was indeed a suitable participant. I interviewed seven participants in their homes and one in the back room of an alternative resource center for women. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two and a half hours, depending on the woman, her experience, and the amount of information she was willing to disclose. The grand tour question and over-arching intent of the study was to explore how the experience of growing older for women is shaped by Paganism. I wanted to
capture the essence of the women’s connection to and experience with Paganism, their experiences as older women in this culture, and generally how they benefited, if at all, from this specific spiritual identity. In attempting to uncover the cultural context and experience of Paganism, I asked these conceptual questions: What does being Pagan mean to/do for you? How has being Pagan affected your growing older? Is there a relation between being Pagan and how you deal with growing older (see Appendix C)?

From these questions I was able to collect profoundly rich, complex and detailed narratives from the participants, describing their spiritual orientations, experiences as Pagan women, and the impact these have had not only on their being older women, but also being women able to celebrate the Divine within.

The open-ended, semi-structured qualitative interview questionnaire consisted of questions probing for actual beliefs and identities, the development over time of women’s identities, biographical histories, important roles, essential qualifiers, and major changes the women experienced as a result of their spiritual life journey. I asked the women to describe for me what they were taught growing up, and whether and how this differed from their current belief system. I asked them about their experiences as older women in a culture characterized by overarching themes of ageism and sexism, how being Pagan arose from or affected that; I enquired about their rituals, specifically croning rituals, and what someone must know when thinking about older Pagan women. The responses to the interviews provided insights into spiritual realities and experiences of the women. Their responses were surprising in their richness, diversity, and intricacy in regard to the intention and initial plan for this study. What was initially a project designed to explore the spiritual lives of elder women identifying as Pagan evolved into accounts of enlightenment concerning empowerment and raising of the feminine consciousness.

After I collected the data on audiotape, I transcribed the interviews so as to capture the words of the participants verbatim. After completing the transcriptions, I analyzed the interviews to “determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the respondents’ views of the world in general and the topic in particular” (McCracken, 1990, p. 42). I performed an initial, manual open coding on the interviews, identifying salient themes, creating codes that would allow me to move from the general
to the particular, encouraging a deeper reflection and more engaged analysis of the text (McCracken, 1990).

After the initial open coding, I transferred the interviews into ATLAS.ti, a computer program designed to manage qualitative data. I then coded the interviews again to identify sub-codes and continued to explore the meaning and interrelatedness of the collective experiences of the women. The use of this computer program enabled me to extract words and word clusters pertaining to the specified code (McCracken, 1990).

Grounded theory or emergent design is an essential part of qualitative research; the intent is, through inductive reasoning, to build a theory that is grounded in the observations (Schutt, 2001). The data analysis and coding with use of ATLAS.ti enabled me to inductively analyze my data, and encouraged me to engage in the reflexive process essential in “exhibiting the characteristics of good intellectual craftsmanship” (McCracken, 1990, p. 54).
Chapter IV
Findings

Initially, this study was intended to explore the spiritual orientations of older Pagan women to examine the degree to which their spiritual identities and practices affected their experiences of growing older in “mainstream” U.S. culture. By mainstream U.S. culture, I am referring to a culture that has come to socially construct aging as an experience associated with disease, loss and negativity; and a culture that also predominantly relates to the religious and spiritual values of the dominant and patriarchal religions of the world. After careful coding and analysis of the participants’ accounts, I identified various other, more positive and empowering themes. As much as this project is embedded within the context of spirituality and aging, it also speaks to the discourse of feminism, mainly to issues concerning ecofeminism and in this case, an empowerment directly relating to spirituality. Taken together as collective experiences, all interviews reflect this phenomenon.

Although there is much to be gained from a shared discourse between gerontology and feminism, there needs to be more communication between the two. Reinharz as cited by Pearsall (1997, p. 74) explains “what feminism and gerontology have in common is an attempt to create social consciousness, social theory, and social policy which will improve the life chances of a specific group; both gerontological and feminist theory attempt to identify the significant common dimensions of ‘their’ groups.” My research is an attempt to employ a feminist framework in an effort to ground gerontological research in this framework (Calasanti, 2003). Specifically, I show how core themes within the Pagan religion and movement constitute a critique of the ageist and sexist assumptions that exist in U.S. culture and within gerontology.

My findings highlight the importance of studying older women and feminism, but the findings also speak to the importance of spirituality, aging, and environment. I have identified three major themes within my data that demonstrate the interconnectedness between acceptance of self as aging, empowerment through spirituality, and nature as source of the sacred. These women were able to embed their experiences of aging within a certain spiritual framework that promotes the acceptance of their “true selves,” i.e. their
capacity to authentically be and know themselves as older women, a strong ethic of spiritual empowerment, and deep connection and equation with nature.

Acceptance of Self as Divine

We live in a culture consumed with an ideal of youth, the equation of youth with beauty, a fear of aging, and a lack of reverence for old age. Aging has come to be equated with a “diminishment of physical attractiveness, professional status and income, social utility, and all too often autonomy and self-esteem” (Leder, 1996, p. 103). Robert Butler coined the term “ageism” in 1969 to describe the “systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender” (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001).

Ageism plagues our society; it is more than just attitudes and beliefs about elders as “other,” but is embedded in our thoughts and behaviors, and manifests itself in our everyday actions within social life (Calasanti, 2001). Being an “old woman” in this culture is perhaps one of the least desirable roles. Furman (1997) claims that “in a society that privileges youth, material productivity, and physical attractiveness, to become old, but especially to become an old woman, is to enter difficult terrain.” The women in this study, acknowledging the ageist dynamic embedded in our society and the cultural abhorrence of old women, have found a way not only to adapt to social injustices, but to exist in a constant state of self acceptance and celebration of themselves as persons and as aging women.

The participants believe themselves to be, as women and beings, Divine, that they embody and manifest both the feminine and masculine aspects of the God and Goddess. Their relation to, and the ability to experience, the Divine Feminine is an important part of their lives. Some of the participants believe in one Goddess, others recognize the Goddess along with many other goddesses, yet others believe that the energies that balance the world are both male and female, and all emphasize the Divinity of human women (Eller, 1993). As one participant explains when asked to describe the essential parts of her person:
I believe we are all the Goddess that is truly what I believe. It’s that we are all Divine, everyone, it’s the Goddess within. *The Charge of the Goddess* says, “for if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without.”

Some participants clearly explained that their beliefs entail recognition of both the Divine Feminine and Divine Masculine. One woman explains:

I celebrate the Divine Feminine and the Divine Masculine. We all have the Divine Feminine and Divine Masculine in all of us. It’s recognizing both.

Another participant sees the world in existence with balancing energies made manifest in the language of *the Goddess* or *God*:

I believe that there is a balance in the world… I don’t question the balance. I believe in feminine energy. And that, by accepting the male and female energies we become more balanced in the world.

Understanding the Divine-as-self plays a fundamental role in the women’s abilities to celebrate themselves as women, especially as aging women. Paganism as an identity has given them a “place to come home to,” a place where they can be comfortable in their own Divine skin, and a place where they can be in touch with “self.” One participant explains:

Being Pagan is something that I am. Declaring myself a Pagan gives me that stake that I can drive in the ground and say “Here I am. This is who I am, this is what I believe. It’s a celebration of being a woman. It’s celebrating who I am instead of society telling me I should be this or be that. Being a Pagan helped me embrace that inside of me, gave me confidence to be who I am and what I believe.
Another woman comments on Paganism as an identity and practice allowing her to be in touch and accept her self and others:

Paganism allows me to really be in touch with my own true self. It’s a pleasant, easy-going, approach that allows me to be in touch with myself and the world around me. Paganism frees me up to accept myself as I am… you know… that I don’t have to… I can feel that it is okay for my body to change, its part of the cycle. I don’t have to fight it.

These women, in their rejection of a patriarchal doctrine and dogma, have created a fluid spiritual community for themselves that is safe, and are able to accept themselves as Divine and perfectly imperfect. They are able to transcend many of the prescribed societal norms that are placed upon aging women by our major societal, cultural, and religious institutions.

The Crone

Seven of the participants identified with the crone archetype, the last of three developmental stages of women conceptualized by Paganism: maiden, mother, and crone, all involving imagery that recognizes the feminine life force, and allows women to see themselves in all stages of life. The maiden represents the virgin and sexual freedom of young women to be independent of their lovers, remaining on a solo soul journey. The mother represents the more nurturing aspects of adult women, and implies motherhood to all life forms. The crone represents the post-menopausal woman in her stage of wisdom, responsibility, and prophecy (Goldenberg, 1979). Identity as crones for these women is paramount to their understanding and accepting of themselves as aging and old women. This is illustrated by these reflections about what it means to them to be a crone:

When I turned fifty I asked my circle to do a croning for me. And I had never really asked them for much before… but I said, “Look this is a very special time and as it happens, my birthday always falls on the spring equinox”… so, they did… I said, “I don’t want to plan anything… I want you guys to do it.” They
planned it, they did for me, they wrote things for me, they gave me gifts, they made a crown for me… it was really wonderful. I really felt affirmed and acknowledged as a woman moving into the wisdom stage of life, the crone stage of life.

Another reflects on the importance of the crone archetype for herself:

Well, it does help that we have Crone Goddesses. A human image that we can recognize as the divine and that other people around us in our groups recognize as divine. It’s like we’re not just invisible and non-represented in spiritual life, which older women are often neglected all together in other religions, there’s just nothing for them to identify with. It helps to know as you change and age, you can identify with Divinity.

One woman relates being a crone to her acceptance of self and the process of aging:

Becoming a crone has been a pathway that has helped me with who and what I am… being comfortable with who and what I am… accepting the changes of life…. That’s a big thing; accepting change is not just all this or all that… it’s a process. The longer I’m in it the more comfortable it feels.

Another believes identity as crone is instrumental to her growth and healing in life:

Well, to go back to the croning. See, I have no idea of where I would be if it weren’t for that. It’s made all the difference.
The Croning Ritual

Five of the participants are ritualized crones, meaning they had a croning ceremony to mark their passage into wise womanhood. Each of the rituals were different, there is no prescription for how to conduct rituals for women who identify as Pagan. The rituals described by the participants, as varied as they were, taken together entailed a sharing of life stories, gifts to the woman being croned, and recognizing and honoring of age, wisdom and the movement into this stage of the feminine life force. One woman reflects on the actual ritual and how it is made manifest in her personal philosophy:

I had people that I felt I could really share with, that I really felt that I could tell my true story… The way I look at the wisdom years really starts at the second Saturn cycle, so I figured out when that was and I had the ceremony at that time. And then I shared with people the four phases within each cycle… eight phases of Saturn. I divided it up my life into those phases and I saw the theme for each phase. What I did, I picked out the important things that happened at each phase and then saw what the overlying theme was. I actually made a booklet and people could look through that if they wanted, and I shared that when I talked about… why I was having it. Most of the people there knew already, most were Pagans… a few that weren’t. So, I did that, I talked about them to and how they made a difference in my life… I had them all bring some thoughts about what they thought wisdom was and how it was working in their lives… we talked about wisdom. There were people of different ages… from forty-five to seventy-five… that were there. Each one of them connected to the wisdom in their selves and by sharing what it meant to each of them that really we all went away enriched.

Another woman reflects on the process leading up to the ritual and expresses the intensity and intimidation she felt when she realized that with being a crone comes a responsibility to be a leader:

I asked my group for a croning ritual. I think on some level, I didn’t tell them what I wanted except that I wanted a full production of it. It’ll create change if it’s done right…. at the ritual I was wearing the cape and uh, and I had a knife that I
had bought at a festival…and they gave me a basket so I put the little knife in there and then off we went on this ritual. So we go out the door and the first person, first station to speak to me says, you’re a crone. You know, that’s what this is about. A crone is a leader, so lead us.

Another reflects on her own wisdom and value despite what society attempts to impose on her:

I suspect that ritual and worship will take on new meaning as we face new challenges, living as crones in a culture that devalues us. Somehow, I remain optimistic. I like who I am and realize that I’ve been truly blessed; I especially like acknowledging that as a crone I have wisdom to share. I’ve been a seeker for so long; it’s quite astonishing to feel valued as a source of inspiration and sustenance to other seekers.

The youngest of the participants, who has yet to reach her self-proclaimed identity as crone, eagerly waits for her time to be a crone and to be respected and celebrated by her spiritual community:

I’m very much looking forward to my croning ceremony…now; you got the people that believe “thou shall not be croned until you’ve gone through menopause…” what about women who have had hysterectomies or other women who don’t go through menopause who for whatever reason who are taking estrogen and stuff. I’m not sure what I believe about when the actual croning ceremony should be, but I think it’s it an acceptance, an acknowledgement, and a celebration of a woman’s passage into that stage of her life. In the Pagan community the older woman is embraced and celebrated, her grey hair is her mantle. I don’t fit that tradition yet, but we’re getting there.

Aging in our culture is a journey characterized by dread, and met with an effort to hide the evidence in almost every way. Women are spending their time investing in anti-aging products of all sorts – from creams to facelifts. In a culture that offers no sanctity or celebration for the old woman, women are living in fear and avoidance of their
physical signs of aging. Women are searching for ways to remedy the struggle between their aging selves and their aging bodies. Patricia Reilly (1995, p. 268) explains “The Old Woman is the culmination of all she has experienced since childhood. All along it has been the natural occurrences of our lives that have been unacceptable: our ‘girlness,’ our bleeding, and our changing bodies during puberty and pregnancy. It makes great sense that we would be forced to continue the battle with our woman-bodies on a new frontier, the aging process. As our bodies change, we twist them out of shape in order to live up to society’s expectation that a woman never grow old.” Clearly older women have their work cut out for them if they attempt to find a comfortable place to age within mainstream society.

The women in this study have not only found a comfortable place to age, but a place that accepts, embraces and celebrates them as crones, and as women in the journey through later life. The women recognize themselves as divine old women, serving as role models who help us all to see and celebrate the divine within. Their experiences provide glimpses into an alternative view of elder women, antithetical to the images of the invisible and disempowered older woman we are inundated with in the worlds of gerontology, even of feminism, and society as a whole. There is much to be learned by gerontologists from the women in this study about the power and beauty of self-acceptance, and the positive impact it has on the experience of aging.

*The Ethic of Empowerment*

There is great variety in the way feminists have conceptualized empowerment. Feminist theory reflects themes regarding power situations within political activity, creative energy in contrast to traditional understandings of domination, coercion and personal advancement in regard to self-definition for thought and action (Browne, 1998). In *Women, Feminism and Aging*, Collette Browne (1998) poses that “Power and empowerment, then, are reconceptualized by feminists as processes more than things, with a focus more on power as energy, potential, self-definition, and competence rather than domination, coercion, and competition” (p. 215). She goes on to say, “A feminist conceptualization of empowerment can be thus summarized as the process of liberation in
self and others, as a life force, a potential, a capacity, growth and energy, and where one works towards community and connection responsibly, as opposed to working primarily toward one’s own individual good” (p.215).

Browne’s interpretation of empowerment within feminist theory is useful when looking at the experiences of the women in this project. A salient theme within the interviews is the women’s feelings of empowerment to make choices, to be exactly who they are, and to create their own image of Divinity. They are confident in their ability to identify with a spirituality that allows them to decide what to believe and how to manifest those beliefs through self-created and self-directed practice, ritual and community.

Freedom is a fundamental principle that initially drew the women to this identity and practice, and remains of vital importance as a key principle that keeps them attached to Paganism. The women were clear about their great dissatisfaction with the patriarchy when describing their developmental processes leading them to Paganism. Most of the women when asked to “tell me the story of how you started this spiritual journey” responded in similar fashion, as captured by this statement: “Well, I started to question the dogma and doctrine of Christianity, I started to really look at the way patriarchal religions were treating women, and sought out something more affirming and real for me as a woman.” The women in this project were very willing to express their discontentment with their perceived subjugation of women, and were sincere in their pursuit of a spiritual orientation that allowed them the chance for empowerment, liberation, and self-definition. One woman explains how Paganism helps her feel empowered as a woman in ways that feminism attempted to but did not quite achieve:

I don’t think it’s fair that I’m making ten to twenty percent less than a man next to me who is making that money and not doing anything different other than being a man… in a lot of ways the feminist movement has been the best thing that has ever happened to our society… but, they did not give women any context to deal with the inequity… you can scream social injustice, you can take it to the law… you can make lawsuits all you want, but the bottom line is you’re going to have to deal with it in your own way. I don’t know… my daughter… we have a lot of discussions… how are you going to deal with it? Do you want to be chastised for being a mom and not being in the work force? Stay at home moms are
ridiculed… women who work and put their kids in daycare are ridiculed… I mean… come on… get off it… why can’t woman choose what path she wants to take in life… what career she wants… why can’t she feel good about her choices and not get a lot of crap. Ok… that’s one problem… Paganism helps address that…. You’re a woman empowered to make choices…

Another participant stresses the importance of being empowered to define for herself what being Pagan means and is, of being able to define for herself what it means to be connected:

It’s all part of the human one with nature… and feeling like I can create my own connection with spirit, which is very powerful and empowering, rather than borrowing someone else’s definition of how it should be.

One woman explains the great satisfaction and affirmation she finds as a crone in her freedom to make major life change:

I think that what it has shown me, mostly the cyclical nature of life. And as such, it brings me to a special awareness that it’s precious. That each stage… I was telling you before… I was turning fifty, my company was being laid-off, it me that I’m going to be a crone soon… even though technically, I’m not a crone, it was coming and I felt empowered because of my set of beliefs to say “ok… as a crone this is what I want and I’m free at this point having… lived and experience the other stages of the wheel, I’m free now to be the crone and to do it the way I want to do it… It’s given me the courage in the belief that there is a veneer to some things, it’s… things might seem to be real; in reality… they’re not real to me. I have freedom that to reject things I don’t believe are real to me. And, so… again it’s that crone thing…

The idea that Pagan ritual can be inventive, eclectic and self-created is of great importance: it furthers the women’s validation in being empowered. The comfort and affirmation the women find in Paganism frees them of societal and religious constraints,
and having previously been locked into a formal religious institution demonstrated their need for and appreciation of choice, agency, and self-definition both in their spiritual practices and in their stations in life. One woman stresses that Paganism allows her to not fall victim to demands and expectations of others:

I’ve always been an open and flowing personality, but I’m so much more grounded in terms of not trying to be who other people need or want me to be. I finally am, because of exposure to Pagan beliefs and principles, I feel reinforced for being the strong and creative woman I am and don’t feel like I have to apologize to anybody for not necessarily being easy to get along with, for not necessarily being the traditional woman that some might prefer that I be. I feel like that’s encouraged and respected and that’s really awesome.

One woman celebrates her ability to be her own person:

Being Pagan means I am my own person, I don’t feel like I have to do what God tells me per se… because I am listening to the voice from within me. I’ve always felt that a lot of the patriarchal religion was kind of like… “bow down to me, worship me, and do it or else”… I don’t feel that way about Paganism; to me it seems gentler, maybe even liberating

The way in which Paganism fosters an ethic of creative freedom through ritual is appealing to one woman:

What I learned at that first gathering was that when they came to celebrate the Winter Solstice, they said anybody who wants to plan can do that. So, we came a little early and did the planning and I had so much fun with that. Everyone gave their own ideas, and shared how they wanted to create it and then we did it. As a group and everyone else came and I thought… whoa… this is real spirituality because you’re creating it, using your God-given gifts to create something that is meaningful instead of going through this same old, same old, week after week… or listening to somebody else talk as if they know what spirituality is and you listen. I felt deeply within me, that real spirituality, if it’s let evolve… it has to
evolve from within, not from listening to somebody tell you something, but to have the exchange… to find out what you already know…

Browne (1998) suggests a method for those interested in the empowerment and experiences of elder women. She points out that it is important to listen to the voices and experiences of the older women. It is imperative to hear the views they have of themselves, to absorb the ways in which they perceive the world, and to validate their perspectives. The women in this study give ample accounts of their experiences with empowerment and liberation through Paganism as the vehicle for self-discovery. Their experience of Paganism as an empowering and liberating spirituality allows us to better understand their authenticity.

Authenticity, according to Browne, is the quality of being genuine. She claims that “Emanating in the private, personal space of a woman’s consciousness, authenticity is a result of courageous thought and action that requires that one be self-defined. To be authentic requires not only speaking and hearing one’s voice, but accepting that voice has value” (Browne, 1998, p. 219). Browne identifies sexism and ageism as the main cause for the silencing of aging women’s voices. The experiences of the women in this study and their empowered and authentic views serve as an alternative model, giving us, as Betty Friedan explains, a different perspective on what the aging experience can really look like for women (Browne, 1998).

The Sacred Mundane

The idea that as women they are part of nature and not separate from it is paramount for the women in this project. In many of the patriarchal and monotheistic religions, the idea of nature as separate and therefore not sacred has caused an interesting dynamic between spirituality and the treatment and relationship with the environment and actual physical earth. Carol Adams (1993) explains that patriarchal spirituality puts emphasis on transcending the body and thus transcending nature. This stands in sharp contrast to both Paganism and ecofeminism which “proposes a path that goes into nature and the body, seeing patriarchy as a reactive cultural response to the elemental power of
the female body and believes that any cultural or religious orientation that demonizes or
denies the elemental power of the female serves patriarchy” (Adams, 1993, p. 7).

The women in this project are aware of this deliberate demonizing of the female
and her body by the patriarchy. In their rejection of religions that do not value the Divine
Feminine, they are working to cultivate the intricate connection between themselves and
Earth. The women in this project celebrate the sacred in the mundane, they are cognizant
of the interrelatedness of the scared and the mundane as whole, and therefore of
themselves as part of that sacred whole. There is a strong equation of the body with
nature and an understanding and acceptance of seeing themselves as part of life’s wheel
rather than separate from it. Recognition of the sacred within as well as without is also
important to these women – there is the scared in the mundane that is salient within their
personal beliefs and philosophies about life. Their identity as Pagan allows them to
recognize the sacred at every level, in every way. The participants have reverence for
themselves as women and also as part of nature. Part of the process consists in
recognizing that Divinity is part of the natural world. These women have met the
challenge many feminists face of how to reconcile the earthbody and the personal body
(Adams, 1993). This is illustrated by these utterances: “It’s recognizing the Divine
within me is recognizing it’s all part of the human one with nature.” “I think that what it
has shown me, mostly the cyclical nature of life. And as such, it brings me to a special
awareness that it’s precious. Again, it has shown me… given me strength because of the
belief that we are all God… showing me the pattern of the wheel, the cyclical nature and
the pattern of comparing the cycles of nature to the cycles of the human being… it’s
hopeful and with hope goes optimism.” “Reverence for the female principle, worship of
the earth mother seemed the most natural fit for me. I’ve long felt attuned to the seasons
and to the phases of the moon, I felt a kinship with creatures and believed the outdoors to
be my true sanctuary. I embraced awareness and sensuality, pushing the envelope with
spiritual of exploration.” “Part of what led me back to being Pagan is I felt the need to
get closer to nature again… I felt, even though I’m more of an indoor person, not a doing
person… an observer… I felt the need to get closer to nature. I felt like I was missing
something essential and it needs to get back to who and what I am … and that we are all
part of the universe around us and that we are all part of the earth… you know… I needed that sense of unity and belonging.”

Conceptualizing the body is a difficult task; accepting and celebrating one’s body as an aging woman is even harder. Julia Twigg in *Aging Bodies* (2003) states that “to write about the body is to write about the mundane and the everyday, for it is what the body is: something that is with us always everywhere – both our constant companion and our essence” (p.143). The women in this project are well acquainted with their bodies as companions and essences. They have met the difficult task with compassion and reverence for their bodies and for the earth. One woman discusses her celebration of her changing body and her ability to embrace what she feels is perfection:

It allows you to be in touch with nature. It’s not like the Catholic Church doesn’t allow it, but it doesn’t encourage it. It’s very mental; whereas this is like totally holistic… you know… and it makes you connect with the true spirit in nature. There’s so much more to it…. The cycles too, it’s so interesting to keep seeing the changes, even weekly, the changes in weather. But, especially looking at the seasons and appreciating how that applies to your own life. So, there’s much more engagement in Paganism. Paganism frees me up to accept myself as I am… you know… that I don’t have to… I can feel that it is okay for my body to change, its part of the cycle. I don’t have to fight it… I do healthy things for myself and take care of myself. But, I’m not living like I have to pretend like I’m not old or I haven’t hit that sixtieth birthday and stuff like that. But, it’s just more natural and accepting… this is what nature does and there is where I am now. It’s perfectly fine… I can be more accepting of myself and of the change that comes with age… so, I celebrate it.

The affirmation of immanence of the Divine in the world, in individual bodies, and in nature is elemental to these participants’ essences (McCredden, 2001). The women in this project have conceptualized themselves as Divine, their bodies as sacred, and the Earth as worthy of reverence in ways that have shown them the importance of
transcending the patriarchy and creating a spiritual orientation that allows them not only to adapt, but to embrace the journey, experience, and growth embodied in aging.
Chapter V

Conclusions

Social science research is important for many reasons: it is a tool for helping to make sense of the world and is an essential component in the building of cumulative knowledge about society. In the world of complexity and great human variation, social researchers attempt to make sense of and discover the order within the complexity of behavior and social interaction (Ragin, 1994). In this study, I as the researcher explored the lives of eight women to discover and better understand the uniqueness and order within their complex lives and intriguing spiritual identities. From this study of Pagan women, it became clear that these women have found a spiritual path and pattern for living that enables them to embrace and celebrate their aging experience. They have found a way to avoid their internalizing of negative societal labels as invisible, aging women. Not only have they found away to avoid the negativity, they have found way to embrace and celebrate their aging. These women embrace and exemplify an aging that juxtaposes the currently assumed and presently studied realities of older women within gerontology as well as women’s studies, and the actualities of an affirmative, empowering and soul-satisfying experience of aging.

Future Implications

There is much to be learned from this research. The Pagan women in this study exemplify a model of aging that can be characterized as organic, natural and holistic; one uniting the body with the natural world. They are at a time in their lives where they are able to live their true potential and essence. As Bolen (2001, p.x) explains that with the “youth-oriented culture and patriarchy in our culture, there is the assumption that to become an older women is to become invisible; a nonentity… however, it is possible for this third trimester to be a time of personal wholeness and integration; when what you do is an expression of who you deeply are.” In addition to being a model of organic living and aging, the participants in this study provide an example of older women who are
living and practicing a feminism that rejects stereotypes, explores new possibilities, challenges limitations, and insists on a redefining of what it means to be an older woman (Bolen, 2001). The women in this study denounce and reject the invisible older woman, and successfully impart a way of living and aging that is often neglected in research on aging women. With their personal truths and stories, they offer us healing indications regarding the importance of wisdom, authenticity, courage, compassion, humor and empowerment in old age.

The concept of Crone is an important aspect of this study, and has implications for all aging women, not just those who identify as Pagan. In the recent past, the word crone has been considered derogatory and used to accentuate the abhorrence of aging women. As societies and cultures change, so do our social constructions of important meaning-making events. Crone as a word and identity for older women is an example of this societal evolution. The participants in this study, whether they have had an actual croning ceremony or not, are all working to reclaim and redefine both the word crone and what it means to be a Crone. Bolen (2001, p.xiv) describes the Crone stage in a woman’s life as being “like the fresh green of spring, where she welcomes new growth and possibilities in herself and others… where there is something solid about her being an adult whose life has borne fruit through cultivation and pruning, as well as tempering and work; where she knows from experience that it takes commitment and love for budding possibilities in herself and others to grow into reality, where she has lived long enough to be deeply rooted in life.” The women in this study are living as soul-satisfied and consciously evolving crones.

The experiences of the women in this study also speak to the importance of creatively living and thinking in regards to the mundane, everyday world and the realm of research and academia. This study is reflective of another point on the continuum of research being done in regards to spirituality and aging. It speaks to the relevancy and bountiful knowledge to be learned and gathered from individuals often pushed to the margins of society. The Pagan women in this study bequeath a perspective that, although it resides outside the boundaries of traditional monotheistic and patriarchal world religions, is essential for understanding and capturing the richness and complexity of aging and the greater human experience. These women help clarify the importance of
living a life and an aging experience woven with authenticity, empowerment and sacredness. Their model heartens a living and embracing of our authentic selves, an empowerment that cultivates our most rich and complex aspects of humanity, and one that celebrates the simple and sacred aspects of the mundane. These women provide us with road maps to a liberated, enlightened, reaffirming, and soul-satisfying life that enables them to express their core values in all their complexity and simplicity.
Bibliography


Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Pagan Women Needed to Participate in Research Project

Women over the age of 50 who identify as Pagan are being recruited to participate in a Masters level Thesis project in the Gerontological Studies Program at Miami University in Oxford, OH. This project looks at how spiritual identity and practice shapes the experience of growing older for women who identify as Pagan. Interviews can be done in the comfort of your home or in any desired location. The interviews will last approximately 1 hour. Questions will be asked pertaining to life history, spiritual identification and practice, and how this spiritual identity shapes the process of growing older. Please contact Lydia at 513.523.5681 or maninlk@muohio.edu.
Appendix B: Informed Consent

My name is Lydia Manning and I am currently a Masters of Gerontological Studies student at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. For this project, I am looking at how Paganism as a spiritual identity and practice shapes the experience of women who are growing older.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the spiritual identities and practices of older Pagan women. I will ask you questions about your spiritual identity as a Pagan and the meaning of this practice as you age. I will tape-record and later transcribe the open-ended interview, which will last approximately one hour. The goal is to understand your personal story of becoming and being a Pagan.

Risks and benefits: There are no physical risks involved in this study. If you are uncomfortable with any question, you are free not to answer it. You are also free to withdraw from the study any time. The benefits involved may include the chance to meet with a person interested in your personal story, and the chance to reflect on important issues concerning your spiritual identity and practice. In addition, your participation will contribute to our knowledge about and understanding of forms of spirituality and their influence on the aging experience.

Confidentiality and Voluntary Participation: All information elicited from the participants in this study will be kept strictly confidential. In any writing I will use fictitious names in such a way that none of your statements can be linked to you. I will be the only one to work with the audiotapes. My committee members may need to see parts of the transcripts to help me with the analysis. I will keep all records of interviews
in a safe place to which only I will have access. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and confidential.

*Questions about the study* can be directed to me, Lydia Manning, at Miami University at (513)-529-8140, or at my home (513)-523-5681. My mailing address is Department of Sociology & Gerontology, Miami University, 396 Upham Hall, Oxford, OH 45056. You may also contact my academic advisor, Dr. Lisa Groger, at (513)-529-1598. Any and all questions or concerns are welcome. More general questions regarding the rights of subjects in research or to confirm the legitimacy of this study can be directed to the Office of Research and Scholarship at Miami University. The phone number is (513)-529-3734 (web site: [humansubjects@muohio.edu](mailto:humansubjects@muohio.edu)).

Please note your signature indicates that you have read and understood all the information within this consent form, and that all of your questions have been adequately answered. You signature indicates your willingness to participate this study. Your collaboration and willingness is greatly appreciated.

____________________________ Signature of Participant

___________ Date ___________ Initial here to agree to be tape-recorded
Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. How would you define your religious affiliation? What do you believe?

2. Is that the religion you were brought up in? What were you taught growing up?

3. In your opinion, what are the major differences between the two (if different)?

4. Tell me the story of how you first started this spiritual journey? (Prompt: What is your biographical history, where/are you a mother, sister, spouse, etc? What were/are your vocations?)

5. What does being Pagan mean to/do for you? (Prompt: how does this affect your everyday life and relationships? What are some of your rituals and current practices?)

6. If you had to define/describe yourself to someone, what kind of person would you say you are?

7. What are the essential parts of your person? Who are you?

8. How has being Pagan affected your growing older?

9. Is there a relation between being Pagan and how you deal with growing older?

10. What are some of the changes you have experienced as a result journey through life?

11. How has your “spiritual orientation” helped you cope with those changes?

12. Is there anything else about you being Pagan that you feel I should know?